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# **YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE GREAT BARD!** **You never expected it to be easy did you, Marcia?**

**Marcia Williams**

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/3645>  
DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.3645  
ISSN: 2271-6424

**Publisher**

Société Française Shakespeare

**Electronic reference**

Marcia Williams, « YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE GREAT BARD!  
You never expected it to be easy did you, Marcia? », *Actes des congrès de la Société française  
Shakespeare* [Online], 34 | 2016, Online since 10 March 2016, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/3645> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.3645

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# YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE GREAT BARD!

## You never expected it to be easy did you, Marcia?

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- 1 It seems to me that for too long, in Britain, there has been a conspiracy to keep Shakespeare from young people. We may have gone beyond the days when only well-educated boys were permitted a peak at Shakespeare but there is still a feeling among many that he is too difficult and only suitable for exam syllabuses. When I first went to see a Shakespeare play, my teacher made it such a big deal that I was literally sick on the theatre floor from nerves. After that it was years before I wanted to let Shakespeare into my life again – what a waste!
- 2 There is also a belief that when you retell Shakespeare's plays for the young you diminish the plays or dumb them down. Perhaps particularly when you retell them in comic-strip form. My aim has never been to replace a Shakespeare play, or even to recreate it in its entirety, but to kindle a young person's interest in Shakespeare and to act as a stepping stone to the Bard. It is inevitable that when you retell any story, it will lose much from its original language and some of its magic. However, I don't think this should be seen as a deterrent. Retellings can give a new life to writings for and of another era. I see retelling the plays of Shakespeare much like the cartoonist Gerald Scarfe sees drawing a caricature. Asked how he creates a caricature and yet retains a likeness to the person, he says you should imagine the face to be a piece of chewing gum: you can stretch it this way and that, but there is always a breaking point; if you don't respect that and break the chewing gum, you will lose the likeness. This is much how I see retelling classic tales. If I stretch the gum too far from its original and it breaks, then I have lost contact with Shakespeare and his plays. I am no longer a stepping stone to the Bard, but a boulder in the way. On the other hand, if I do not create my own vision of the play, and bring with it my knowledge of writing and creating comic strips for a younger audience, then I do

Shakespeare a disservice by not giving it fresh life and vigour. So, that's the theory, but of course the path of creativity never runs smoothly!

- 3 Working on Shakespeare turned out to be very, very different from working on other classics. My initial attempts to recreate the plays were not auspicious. For a start, my editor was firmly against me retelling Shakespeare's plays.  
 "You don't mess with the Great Bard," was her first reaction to my suggestion.  
 When that failed to dissuade me and I put in another request, it was: "You do know that not everyone likes comic strips?"
- 4 In retrospect I should perhaps have listened to her more or at least road-tested the idea of creating comic-strip versions of the plays before persuading her to agree. But road-testing just tends to confirm the doubts that I inevitably have about my ability to create any book. So when it came to retelling Shakespeare's plays I did what I always do and flung myself in at the deep end and prayed. I soon learned that my editor was right, but only in part... I am sure we should be meddling with the Bard, but maybe not quite as lightly as we meddle with other writers. This, I think, is not only because there are far more devotees of Shakespeare than any other author – and you sense that they all have their beady eyes on you – but also because he can be so very slippery! His plots, his characterization, his humour, his language and even his stage directions all demand detailed attention.
- 5 I started by trying to recreate *Romeo and Juliet*, a play I thought I knew quite well. I quickly discovered that there is a huge difference between 'knowing' for your own enjoyment and 'knowing' to give enjoyment to others. I was brought up on Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*.<sup>1</sup> There is much to admire in these retellings and I am loath to criticize them as they were of their time, but for me they always failed in what should be their most important task: to leave me, and I suspect other young readers, feeling excited about Shakespeare. It also has an amazingly sexist introduction by Charles Lamb, who doesn't consider that a girl might read Shakespeare for herself, but suggests to the "young male reader" that he might like to share the more suitable passages with his sister!
- 6 Anyway, I feel that Lamb's *Tales* tends to follow Shakespeare down some of his more confusing plot lines, losing the reader on the way. There is something very flat and humourless about them and they give no sense of theatre, magic, language or of Shakespeare's wonderfully crafted characters. They also fail to make the connections between Shakespeare and young people, and there are so many of these: his incredibly visual language, his bawdy, often over-the-top humour, the universal and timeless arguments between parents and children, his witches, magic, cross-dressing and general madness.
- 7 However, my first retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, if not similar to Lamb's, was equally hopeless, although it was at least addressed to both boys and girls. I tried to recreate the play as a whole and it became a confusion of little pictures with my own text telling the story *and* my own text in the speech bubbles. I remember doing this even now, as it felt so wrong: it was as though I was putting words into Shakespeare's mouth - quite hopeless! Yet knowing something is wrong does not mean that you automatically know how to put it right.
- 8 I foolishly turned to my editor for help. Not surprisingly, she was unsympathetic.  
 "Well," she said, "you never expected it to be easy did you, Marcia?"

- 9 I think I might have given up at that point but for a stroke of luck: the rebuilding of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on the banks of the Thames was underway. Although it wasn't open for performances, you could have a guided tour with an actor whose enthusiasm for the Tudor theatre and ability to recreate its atmosphere in the mind's eye was infectious.
- 10 Even though the original Globe was a theatre of professionals, it had its roots in medieval pageants and in the religious dramas that Shakespeare would have seen on the streets as a boy. The Globe was still partly open to the elements and still borrowed many ideas from these travelling players – many performances, for instance, ended with a jig, accompanied by a piper and a hobby-horse or with a short farce on some topical theme.
- 11 The audiences at the early Globe probably behaved much as though they were still watching a street performance. A trumpeter would blow the First Sounding, warning the audience that the players were ready. At the Third Sounding the play would begin, but the audience was not hushed! They joined in the actors' lines, heckled, bought, ate, threw things, courted, pickpocketed and generally engaged in street activities. It seemed to me that in this small circular space the audience became a part of the performance.<sup>2</sup>
- 12 Of course some of this was already known to me, as I am sure it is to you, but actually seeing the venue and hearing about it on site made all the difference. It gave me that spark of inspiration that I needed to get the project off the ground. Standing in the space and imagining Shakespeare and the Lord Chamberlain's Men performing there was an eye-opener to me: the hustle and bustle of Tudor street life encapsulated in this tiny area! At last I had found the door through which I could enter and create my own retellings. I had been right to hesitate over my first attempts, because this was not about recreating stories but recreating plays. I now had a structure from which to build the 'performances' that I was determined to try and create on the page.
- 13 First of all, the cover of the book becomes the theatre itself with the musicians at the bottom calling you in to the performance (Figure 1).

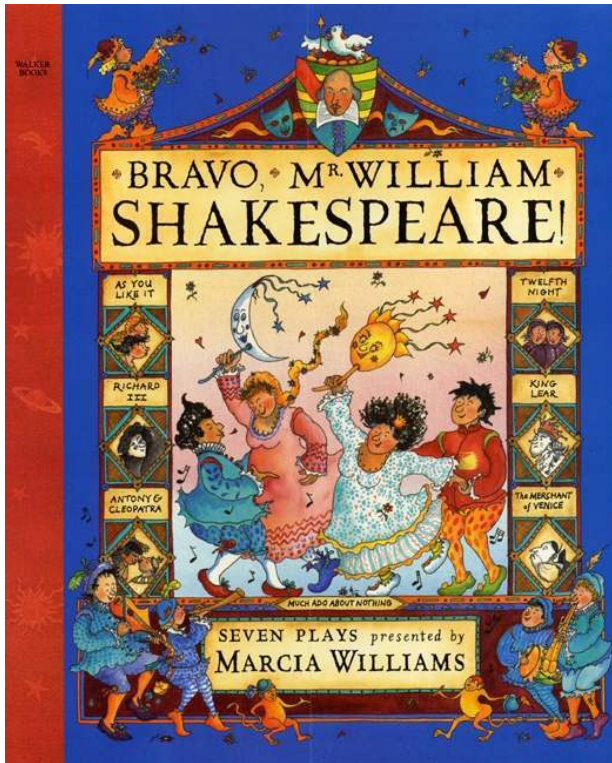


Figure 1: Marcia Williams, *Bravo, Mr. William Shakespeare!* (cover)

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- 14 Then, you open the book and find a flag is flying and the first trumpet has sounded: you'd better hurry, the famous Globe Theatre is putting on a play! You look around to see if the boss will notice you leaving work. But you shouldn't have worried, because when you join the throng of people processing to the theatre your boss is already there – and isn't that our good Queen Bess? Sensible move her taking her ferret for there is bound to be an abundance of fleas amongst the audience! (Figure 2)

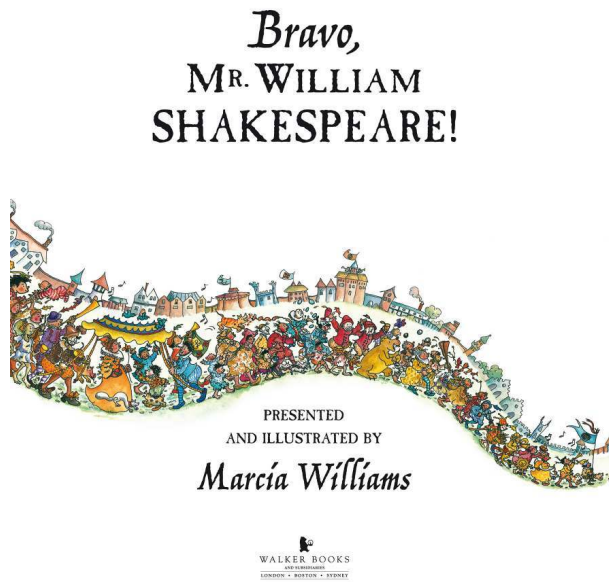


Figure 2: Marcia Williams, *Bravo, Mr. Shakespeare!* (title page)

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- 15 You turn the page and you have passed through the door and into the Globe. Here a new world awaits you. You pay your penny if you're a groundling, or your tuppence if you're a toff, and get handed a playbill. Hurrah, a new season of plays is being presented and you are delighted to see the first play is *As You Like It*, set in the magical forest of Arden. You prepare yourself for an afternoon of fun and laughter. Then you notice that at the bottom of the playbill you are requested not to throw hard objects at the actors, so you discard your turnips and nuts and buy some over-ripe plums from a vendor, plus a pie for yourself and yet another beer. Perfect, you're ready to turn the page, to where the performance is about to begin. (Figure 3)



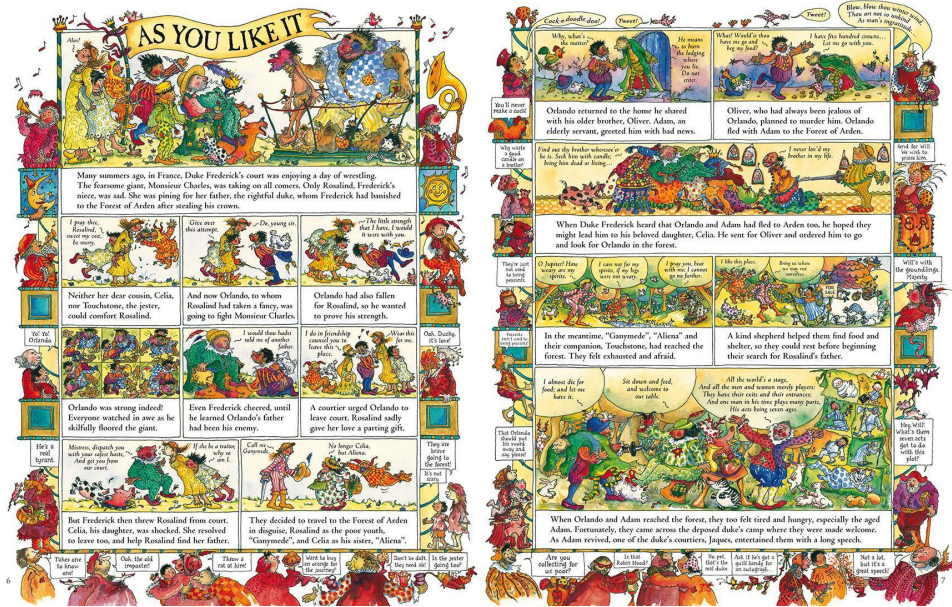


Figure 3: Marcia Williams, *Bravo, Mr. William Shakespeare! (As You Like It)*

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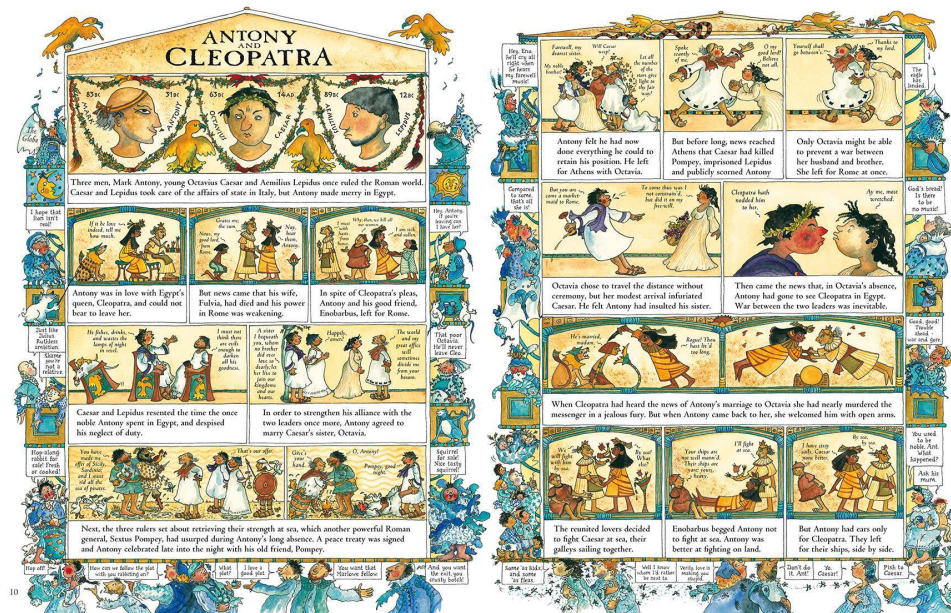
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- 16 As the play starts, you look around. If you're a toff, you look down into the courtyard and wish the wind would change because those stinkards down there do truly stink! Ugh, and is that a rat you see scuttling between those filthy knaves? But you swill your wine and soon you are lost in Shakespeare's world. If you're a groundling, you jostle for position, whack a passing pickpocket and hurl your rotten plum at Frederick when he banishes Rosalind from the court. Then you spot Mr Shakespeare himself in the audience, cheering on the performers and refining their speeches for the next performance. Has he a quill on him? Might you get his autograph?
- 17 For this performance of *As You Like It* the players are mostly in tones of yellow and green and the audience are all in reds and pinks. This is to make a clear distinction between the two for the sake of my readers. The play is the thing – so visually it should appear to stand out. The audience act as a frame for the most important central content.
- 18 The tradition of comic strip is not as strong in England as it is in France. I was not allowed to read comics as a child because my mother considered them an abomination, full of American slang, bad English and inappropriate violence. Ironically, this is probably why I create comic strips now. Anyway, in my experience young people in England are far more adept at reading comic strips than adults are. It seems to be a skill and passion you put to one side in adulthood. Many adults are inclined to dismiss the comic strip as simplistic, yet when they try to read it, they are unable to move between its different and often complex layers. Children, from a very young age, seem to have little trouble with this, but even so it is important that the layout is clear and consistent so that readers always know where they are in the conceit. My aim is to make things accessible and not to confuse – I leave confusion to Shakespeare!
- 19 Yet, to answer those who feel that by making Shakespeare accessible to young people you are dumbing him down, I would say that there are some retellings which might do that,

but there are also others which are rich and multi-layered. I believe that comic strip is an ideal way to retell a play, as it works on many levels and its dramatic content is closely aligned to the theatre; the comic strips are scenes on a page. Every theatrical performance is a collaboration between the director, the actors, the set and costume designers and, of course, the audience. In much the same way, the different layers a comic strip contains collaborate with each other to produce a dramatic performance. A sense of drama is created by the interaction between the audience, who sit in the borders of the page, the story text, the speech bubbles, and the pictures.

- 20 They also offer a variety of options for the child, just as the theatre does. The less confident readers will find a space that suits them and the more confident readers will weave their way through the multiple layers: the visual information in the main picture boxes; the story plot in the text boxes; Shakespeare's own words in the bubble text. Or the reader can imagine him- or herself as part of the audience. Make his/her own bawdy comments or react to theirs. Though the audience's comments are mostly designed to amuse and reflect the noisy behaviour of Elizabethan audiences, I do also use them to explain complex words or ideas. And if there is a particularly dark or violent act, I may get one of the audience to crack a joke to lighten the moment. Most importantly, the reader brings his or her own imagination to the performance. Just as in any performance you find your own space and your own meaning.
- 21 When I visit schools I find a huge variety of responses to the book. There are those who are immediately attracted to using it as a basis for their own dramatic performances. There are those who become obsessed with the audience and their comments, and others who lose themselves in the visual detail. Perhaps one of the most rewarding reactions was that of a young boy with dyslexia. I knew he couldn't read, yet he put up his hand and asked if he could read the play, which was *Julius Caesar*, to the rest of his class. My heart missed a beat as I imagined a long, agonizing process of him stumbling over words and his classmates losing all interest in Shakespeare's plays, now and forever. However, I didn't want to puncture his enthusiasm so I had to let him stand up and give it a go. That boy was about nine years old and could hardly read a word, but was he visually literate! He read the pictures with such dramatic effect that the whole class was mesmerized and spontaneously applauded at the end.
- 22 As Cassius says in the play:
- How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er,  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!<sup>3</sup>
- 23 In the next play in the book, *Antony and Cleopatra*, there is a totally new set of colours (Figure 4) and in *Richard III*, which follows, another palette still (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Marcia Williams, *Bravo, Mr. William Shakespeare! (Antony and Cleopatra)*

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Figure 5: Marcia Williams, *Bravo, Mr. William Shakespeare! (Richard III)*

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- 24 This is for several reasons: the colours were chosen to reflect the setting, atmosphere and style of the play and so give the reader yet another layer of information. But perhaps more importantly, I also saw this as a way of achieving a pause, an imaginary curtain before the playgoer watches the next play. Few adults, let alone children would want to sit through two of Shakespeare's plays back to back, so I wanted the colours to work as a

visual check. Stop, pause, think: you are now entering a new world, are you ready? Maybe you want to go back and visit the one you've just left or spend time absorbing the last play before moving on to the next. I didn't want the different performances to feel like different chapters of the same story. There is no denying that every play is massively condensed, but the book is still not designed to be raced through as a whole. Each play is so different, it is more than a new chapter – it is a new world.

- 25 When I was at school, I desperately wanted to become an actor. One of my worst childhood memories is of being cast as Peter Quince and not Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Once I left school I never pursued a career in the theatre but, through recreating these plays, I feel I have lived out my dream, for in a way I was actor, director, set and costume designer.
- 26 So, in the end, whether my audience is watching *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Twelfth Night*, it is up to them to decide whether the performance works. I would like the readers to feel as though they are members of the audience, toff or stinkard! That having paid their entrance fee they can engage in heckling, cheering and generally participate in each performance. Perhaps then, when they get the chance to see a Shakespeare play on stage, they will be full of anticipation and think, like Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music / Creep in our ears" (5.1.55-56).
- 27 Or, at the very least, throw a ripe plum or two!

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## NOTES

1. Charles et Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London & New York, JM Dent, 1975.

2. On how to depict the original Globe and Elizabethan theatre, see for instance the illustrated book by Aliki, *William Shakespeare & the Globe*, London, Harper Collins, 1999; also see C.W. Hodges,

*Enter the Whole Army. A Pictorial Study of Shakespearean Staging 1576-1616*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

3. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.1.111-113, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Glasgow & New York, Oxford University Press, 1945. Further references will be to this edition.

## ABSTRACTS

In the past, Shakespeare has not been made accessible to young people in Britain. Retellings should be seen as an introduction to the original, a reanimation, not as a desecration. It is not easy to retell the plays. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre showed Marcia Williams how the audience interacted with the plays and therefore how to recreate them by involving the reader in a similar way. The many layers of a comic strip mirror the elements of a theatrical production. The reader is the audience and participates in the performance. The comic strip allows each child to respond in a way that suits him or her and get the most from their involvement.

Pendant longtemps les jeunes Britanniques n'ont pas vraiment eu accès à Shakespeare. Une réécriture, une adaptation, devrait se concevoir comme une introduction à l'original, une réanimation, et non pas une profanation. Il n'est pas facile d'adapter les pièces de Shakespeare. Grâce au Théâtre du Globe à Londres, Marcia Williams a pu découvrir comment le public réagissait aux pièces, ce qui lui a permis de les recréer en impliquant le lecteur de la même façon. Les différents niveaux d'une bande dessinée correspondent aux éléments d'une représentation théâtrale. Le lecteur fait partie du public et participe à la représentation. La bande dessinée invite chaque enfant à réagir à sa façon et à profiter au maximum de son expérience de lecture.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Antony and Cleopatra, As You Like It, comic strips, Globe Theatre, Lamb Charles and Mary, retelling the classics, retelling Shakespeare's plays, Shakespeare and young people, Richard III, Romeo and Juliet

**Mots-clés:** adaptation, Antoine et Cléopâtre, Comme il vous plaira, classiques littéraires, Lamb Charles et Mary, réécritures de Shakespeare, Richard III, Roméo et Juliette, Shakespeare pour la jeunesse, Théâtre du Globe